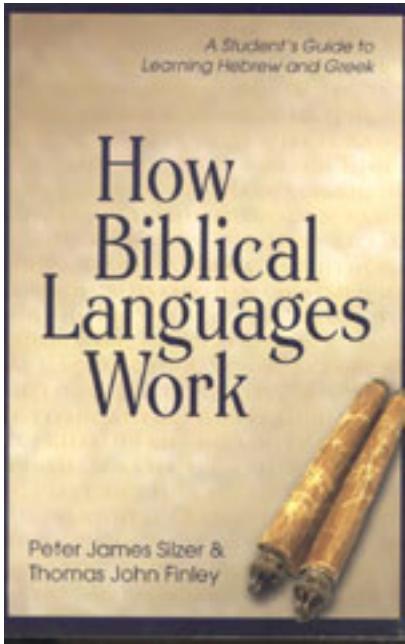


RBL 04/2005



Silzer, Peter James, and Thomas John Finley

How Biblical Languages Work: A Student's Guide to Learning Hebrew and Greek

Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004. Pp. 258. Paper. \$16.99.
ISBN 0825426448.

Max Rogland
Trinity Presbyterian Church
Rochester, MN 55906

Both authors are well-qualified to write on the subject of biblical languages: Silzer worked for many years in Bible translation and currently teaches at Biola University in conjunction with the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Finley is Professor of Old Testament and Semitics at Talbot School of Theology and has published a number of articles on Hebrew linguistics. The present volume is the product of a teaching strategy they have developed for introducing general linguistic concepts to students about to undertake the study of Hebrew or Greek. Though the book is written primarily for students in beginning courses in the biblical languages, it is not intended as a teaching grammar of either language. Rather, as the preface states, its goal is to help the beginning student “to understand the basic patterns of the biblical languages” prior to learning the details of grammar (13). It is thus essentially an introduction to general linguistics, with some specific application to Hebrew and Greek. As such the book is “an auxiliary tool to supplement the traditional grammars” (14).

Chapter 1 contains a general overview of how language works. The authors begin by discussing five key characteristics of language: (1) its nature as a system; (2) its use of conventionalized symbols; (3) its use by social groups; (4) its function as a tool for

communication and for the expression of identity; and (5) its productivity. The authors then briefly introduce the issues of linguistic form, meaning (semantics), and context, all of which will be taken up in greater detail in the chapters that follow. This is followed by a discussion of the relation between language and culture, particularly focusing on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and reactions to it by other linguists. As an aid to the student, this chapter, as every other chapter in the book, provides a supplemental bibliography, information on Internet resources, and exercises.

Chapters 2–4 are very straightforward, introducing the student to basic grammatical issues of phonetics and writing, morphology, and syntax. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of written language and of different writing systems (logographic, syllabic, and alphabetic). The authors then proceed to phonetics, both on a general level as well as in relation to Hebrew and Greek in particular, and in the process introduce the student to the written characters of the biblical languages and their transliterated equivalents. Chapter 3 focuses on the topic of morphology. The authors discuss various types of morphemes found in language (e.g., roots versus affixes, bound versus free morphemes, derivational versus inflectional patterns) and their functions. After a general linguistic introduction to these issues, the authors again proceed to relate them to biblical Hebrew and Greek. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how languages such as English, Hebrew, and Greek are to be classified in terms of their morphological structure (analytic, agglutinating, or fusional). Chapter 4 introduces the student to the syntax of phrases and clauses. The authors discuss noun, verb, adjective, and prepositional phrases in turn and how these different phrases can be combined into larger clauses. The chapter concludes with a discussion of word order.

Chapters 5–7 are more notable in that they introduce the student to subjects not always covered in a beginning course on the biblical languages, namely, discourse patterns (i.e., text grammar or text linguistics), semantics, and linguistic variation and change. Chapter 5 focuses on the “grammar” of texts or linguistic units larger than the sentence. Different text-types such as narrative, instructional discourse, and poetry are discussed, and the authors draw attention to some of the tools necessary for the study of discourse, primarily unit delimitation and the tracking of participants in a discourse. Chapter 6 provides a basic introduction to semantics, illustrating some of the complexities created by the realities of polysemy, semantic overlap, and the use of figurative language. The authors thus alert the student to some errors that are commonly made in the area of semantics. Various semantic roles of an utterance such as patient, agent, and goal are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a brief introduction to pragmatics, discussing the effect of extralinguistic context on the interpretation of an utterance, as well as speech-act theory and the question of what a speaker intends to “do” with an utterance. Chapter 7 discusses the question of linguistic variation in a language and the factors that can contribute to

such variation (dialect, social situation, diachronic change, etc.). Such variations can occur on a variety of grammatical levels: phonetic, morphological, syntactical, or semantic. The chapter concludes by discussing the topic of language groups or subgroups, addressing the matter of distinct yet related languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic.

Chapter 8 is of a very different nature from the ones that precede it and consists of practical advice for studying Hebrew and Greek. The authors point out how personality type can affect language learning, and they suggest different learning strategies depending upon these different types. They also discuss the matter of setting goals for the study of the biblical languages and of assessing one's progress. The book as a whole concludes with a very helpful and accurate glossary of linguistic terms.

The book is clearly written, and the linguistic description is consistently accurate. My quibbles with the content of the volume were extremely few and of a fairly minor nature. The discussion of semantics in chapter 6 is especially good, and for the beginning student it would provide a much more concise introduction to the subject than, for example, M. Silva's excellent though much larger treatment, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*. Chapter 8 also provides very helpful guidance for the beginner who wishes to develop a plan for studying the biblical languages and would be highly recommended to anyone commencing study. In reading the book, however, I was persistently nagged by questions as to whether a beginning student, completely unfamiliar with Hebrew or Greek, would either be motivated enough to work through it prior to beginning his or her study of the biblical languages or whether he or she would be able to benefit significantly from much of the material presented herein (the discussions of phonetics and morphology in particular seemed to contain a good deal more information than a beginner could reasonably be expected to grasp). The authors have apparently integrated the substance of this book in their own teaching, but one nevertheless wonders how successful it would be in another setting. Such questions aside, the book is undeniably well-written and would be a useful resource for the study and teaching of Hebrew and Greek.